No. 44. On Charity.

1st Epistle general of St. John, 3d Chap. 17th Verse.

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him—how dwelleth the love of God in him?

The author of this epistle is distinguished by the name of the beloved disciple, and is called, by way of eminence, above all the rest, "the disciple whom "Jesus loved." St. John, therefore, we may infer, was in a very high degree of a kind and merciful, a beneficent and charitable disposition. Now that this is something more than bare surmize, or vain conjecture, is abundantly evident, from the vein of tenderness and charity that runs through all the writings of this Apostle, and is most visibly conspicuous in the Epistle of which my text is a part. Hence it is that he has clearly displayed the full dimensions of true christian charity; that he has ascertained "the height and depth, the length and

breadth, of evangelical love." Our conduct and behaviour should evidently demonstrate, that we are so far conformable to the example of our Saviour, and the precepts of the Gospel, as to have an assurance, by acts of humanity, kindness, and charity, "that "the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts." And our rule of judging is this—if we have this world's goods, so much as to be really above want ourselves, and, observing a fellow-creature in need, shut up our bowels of compassion from him, by comparing such conduct with the writings of the Gospel, we shall learn that the love of God is not in us.

In this discourse I shall endeavor to shew, first, that it is a duty incumbent upon all Christians in general, to be mutually kind and charitable to each other. 2dly. That those who are blessed with a sufficiency of this world's goods, and have the most frequent opportunities of doing good, are indispensably obliged to be charitable to the Poor.

First, should we look on ourselves merely as men, or as members only of a civil society, we should find, notwithstanding that this duty of mutual love and beneficence exactly coincides with the dictates of reason, and is bound upon us by no less a law—so far at least as it is a moral duty—than that of self-preservation. For since man's allotted portion upon earth is to wrestle with want, weakness, and misery, he is constrained, of necessity, to call in others of his own kind to his assistance; that so, by a mutual interchange of good offices, they may, by their united force and endeavours, ward off the inconveniencies of this life, and thus alleviate the weight of those calamities which are the common lot of human nature.

If, therefore, we are thus united to each other by the bonds of love and friendship, as we are men, those obligations will doubtless prove much stronger, which the Almighty has laid upon us, as we are Christians. For the dictates of nature are confirmed

and improved by the principles of Religion, and the laws of nature are refined and exalted by the precepts of Christianity.

There is no duty our Saviour presed upon His disciples with a warmer application than this of mutual kindness and charity. This He lays down as the sum and substance of the whole second Table, which was delivered to us from God by the hands of Moses; and makes it one of those two principal hinges on which "hang all the law and the prophets. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all "thine heart, with all thy soul, and with all thy "mind; this is the first and great Commandment;" and yet the second is like unto it; equally great, and so exactly like it, that, if it were posible, we might reckon this the first Commandment too—"thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself"—thou shalt do thy utmost to promote the interest and welfare of every one to whom thou hast any opportunity of doing good, with a zeal and affection of

the same kind and degree with that which thou bearest to thyself.

A doctrine this of such excellent use, such weight and moment, that this heavenly preacher of peace and righteousness endeavoured, upon all occasions, to implant and fix it in the hearts of His followers; but more especially, not long before He took His leave of this world, considering with Himself that the dying of a departing friend were likely to make the deepest impression, He thus beseeches, with the most affectionate tenderness, His chosen disciples; "if ye love me, keep my commandments, and this "is my commandment"—my peculiar precept that I would have you to observe above all the rest— "that ye love one another: for by this shall all men "know that ye are my disciples, if you have love "one towards another."

Nay, lest his disciples should not, in the exercise of this duty, exceed the level of the Scribes and Pharisees, but content themselves with the low and

common instances of charity; this precept of love which he here enjoins, He expresly calls "a new "commandment"—such a commandment as had never before been practis'd upon earth, in that height and perfection which He should exact from all His followers. And, therefore, once and twice He repeats the injunction, and both exhorts and requires them to imitate that perfect pattern which He himself had set them, "to love one another as I have "loved you."

When we fix our thoughts on that infinite love of the Son of God, which constrained Him to leave the Bosom of His father, and to empty himself of all His Glory, that He might take upon him the form of a servant, and in that capacity effectually administer to the wants and necessities of all mankind—when we contemplate such transcendant kindness—how can we but entertain a most lively, as well as grateful, sense of His unexampled love?—confessing, with St. Paul, "that we know the Grace

"of our Lord Jesus Christ, that tho' He was rich, "yet for our sakes He became poor, that we, thro' "his poverty, might be rich." And as He came from heaven, so while he continued upon earth, and dwelt among us, love was still conspicuous in all His words and actions. The sun itself is not more constant, regular, and liberal, in dispensing its heat and light thro the world, than He was in shedding the sovereign influence of His healing virtues, not only on the bodies but also on the souls of all such persons as were humbly conscious of their spiritual infirmities, and sadly sensible they stood in need of a Physician. He had so tender a care for the afflicted and miserable, so great a desire to promote the welfare and happiness of men, that "He went about doing "good;" travelling from place to place, to find out the lame, and the deaf, and the blind, and other such like objects of compassion, whom he never failed to comfort and relieve; dispensing blessings where ever He came; so that we may truly say, the

whole course of His life was nothing else but one continued act of charity; for having loved his own, "He loved them unto the end."

But never was our Saviour's charity to mankind more triumphant, nor displayed in larger and brighter characters, than when He hung extended and bleeding on the cross, that "He might give His "life a ransom for many." This was a gift of that inestimable value, that, if we duely consider it, attended with all its blessed effects and consequences we cannot but acknowledge it to be the best and greatest of blessings that either God could bestow, or man receive.

I now proceed to shew, in the second place, that those who are blessed with a sufficiency of this world's goods, are indispensably obliged to be charitable to the poor.

"Charge them," says the Apostle, "that are "rich in this world, that they do good, that they be "rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing

"to communicate"—see that you lay a strict injunction upon them, that they be ready and willing, upon all occasions, to distribute their alms among the necessitous, and to bestow some part of their worldly substance for the relief of such as are in absolute want—that so, by these means, they may be truly rich, "rich in good works."

But let it not be imagined that, because we are not what is esteemed rich by the world, we are therefore exempt from the duty of charity. No, every man as he hath received from God, so let him give to his necessitous brethren; for this is the most proper and effectual way of expressing our gratitude to Almighty God, for that portion of wealth and abundance of comforts He has severally bestowed upon us.

And as those who are possessed of worldly comforts are, beyond expression, indebted to the Almighty for His peculiar favors vouchsafed unto them, "by shining upon their tabernacle, and lifting "them up above the rest of their brethren—and by

"watering their fleece with the dew of heaven, while "the earth is dry all round about them;" as such men, I say, are exceedingly indebted to their great Benefactor for these his blessings; so they ought to have a grateful sense of them, and to be sincerely thankful for them to the Almighty.

But now, since "the goodness of man extendeth "not unto God," nor is it possible for him "to be "profitable to his Maker;" the only real return of gratitude and thankfulness that such can make to the Lord is, to devote some part of their substance to the relief of those who are in necessity and distress.

Let it be considered further, that we are not proprietors, but stewards only, of what we possess.

The absolute necessity of there being such a thing as government in the world, doth likewise imply an absolute necessity of different ranks and degrees among men; which may suffice to vindicate, as well the goodness, as the wisdom of Providence, in the unequal distribution of temporal Blessings; since we are fully

assured no civil society, no order nor government could subsist without it.

But nevertheless, they that are raised to a higher station, and are blessed with more ample fortunes than others, would do well not to exalt themselves, but rather consider "who it is that hath made them to "differ from other men," and that they can boast of nothing which "they have not received;" remembering, moreover, that "to whom much is given," of them most certainly, "shall much be required"—the more they are enabled to be helpful to others, the more God expects at their hands; and the greater number of talents they have committed to their trust, the greater, doubtless, will be their account. For we may with reason ask, in the words of Solomon, "shall the clouds of heaven "be full of rain, and shall they not empty themselves "upon the earth? Shall the rich have their bellies "filled with hid treasures, and shall they suffer the "poor to perish for want?"

The Inhabitants of the earth are but one great

family, whereof God is the common Father and
Master; who, by His wise appointment, hath
ordered that the abundance of the Rich should prove a
supply for the wants of the poor; that so, as the
Scripture speaks, "there may be equality," and a
due provision be made for all His children. If
then it be thus, as it unquestionably is, "let every
"one, as he has received from the hand of the Al-
"mighty, minister unto the necessities of others, as
"becomes a wise and faithful steward of the houshold
"of God;" that so, at the last day, "he may give
"up his account with joy, and not with grief;" and
be received with that most kind and transporting salu-
tation, "well done thou good and faithful servant,
"enter thou into the joy of thy Lord."

Let me add, lastly, that our reward or punish-
ment will be assigned and allotted us in the life to
come, according either to the good or bad disposal of
our substance in this.

Let neither the extravagant nor the covetous imagine

shall escape unpunished. For the dismal day will infallibly come, when he who wasted his substance in idous living, shall beg in vain "for a drop of "water to cool his tongue;" and when the miserable worldling who, as the Prophet speaks, "loads him= "self with thick clay, and lets his money," as the Son of Sirach describes him, "rust under a stone to "be lost"——the time will surely come, when such un= profitable servants, who "hide their talents in the "earth," and cannot find in their hearts——if I may be allowed so apposite an expression——to relieve their distressed brethren, "shall be bound hand and foot, "and cast into outer darkness, where shall be weeping "and gnashing of teeth."

This is a gloomy and a frightful prospect, but the charitable man may entertain himself with one all over fair and delightful; being well assured he shall never fail of his reward, as "having the pro= "mise both of the life which now is, and of that "which is to come. For blessed is the man that

"considereth the poor." He that in this life disperses his wealth amongst the poor and needy, shall, in the next, be in posession of joys unspeakable and full of glory.

Such are the arguments the scriptures afford in support of the duty of charity. To try the strength of their impression, let me conduct you to some miserable dwelling, whose wretched inhabitants are pierced with every arrow in the quiver of affliction—poverty, nakedness, hunger, disease. See the distracted father laid upon the bed of death, struggling with a long and complicated disorder, tortured with the most agonizing pains, which are increased by the ill-boding apprehensions that, ere long, the sharer of his toils and the pledges of their love, will become a prey to beggary and wretchedness, to poverty and contempt. See on the other side, the partner of his cares, the dearest object of his affection, dissolved in tears, the very image of love and of despair. See his starving offspring clinging around his aching bed, crying to their father

for their daily subsistence. Their cries, alas! are vain. His soul is winging its flight to God that gave it. And to complete their misery, behold the creditor rushing in upon them, to take the little All that the destroying hand of poverty had left. Let me here appeal to the man whom providence has blessed with this world's goods, and ask him if he can refuse contributing to the relief of such wretched objects? He surely cannot, unless he is an exception to humanity. But let it be remembered, that the merit of preventing is still greater than of relieving such scenes of woe. Yet, alas! when we exhort our hearers to frequent and liberal acts of charity, our exhortations are often overpowered by the ready, the too ready recollection, that wealth was not acquired without much exertion of body and application of mind—that the demands of distinction, of rank, of station, preclude them from paying a minute attention to the wants of the necessitous. The pretence is specious. But that none may deceive themselves by it—elevate, for a moment, your

minds beyond the scene of this mortal life: let us suppose ourselv espectators, as we one day shall be, of the last, most awful of all solemnities. Behold! the powers of heaven are shaken; the earth quakes; the graves are opened; the trumpet of the Archangel sounds "arise "ye dead, and come to judgment;" we are all instantly assembled before the judgment seat of Christ, waiting, with anxiety, our final sentence; you see the Almighty Judge encircled with majesty, which no eye can bear stedfastly to behold, and you rest your immortal salvation—in defiance of all the arguments in support of charity—on this deceitful foundation, that your wealth was your own.

May God of his mercy, before that awful period arrives, change all such deluded flinty hearts, that your ears may not tingle with this dreadful denunciation—"unmerciful, ye shall find no mercy!"

Theoph^{s}. J. St. John.

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